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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000410

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, S/CT, NSC FOR E. MILLARD

LONDON FOR POL/RIEDEL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 3-11-13

TAGS: [PTER PHUM PREL MOPS CE LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA NAVY SINKS LTTE SHIP; MOST OBSERVERS  
THINK PEACE TALKS WILL CONTINUE

Ref: (A) Colombo 397  
- (B) Reston VA DTG 100659Z  
- (C) Reston VA DTG 102358Z

(U) Classified by Lewis Amselem, Deputy Chief of  
Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b,d)

1. (C) Summary: After a reported exchange of fire on March 10, the Sri Lanka Navy sunk a cargo ship, that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) claimed was one of its merchant ships. While the monitoring mission investigates the incident, the Norwegian Embassy and others have expressed concerns about the effect of the incident on the peace talks. Despite the concerns, most observers believe that talks will continue. End Summary

Conflicting GSL and LTTE reports on incident  
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2. (C) According to Sri Lanka Navy reports (detailed in Ref A), the navy intercepted a LTTE arms supply ship approximately 180 nautical miles (207 miles) off the coast of Mullativu (on the north eastern coast of Sri Lanka). The navy then reports that after it ordered the ship to stop, the cargo ship's crewmembers opened fire. In defending itself, the naval ship returned fire and sunk the LTTE vessel.

3. (SBU) The "TamilNet" website, believed to be controlled by the LTTE, reports that the Sri Lanka Navy attacked a LTTE merchant vessel 220 nautical miles (about 250 miles) off the eastern coast. It also reports that LTTE political wing leader Thamilmichelvan sent a letter to the Minister of Defense condemning the sinking of the ship. The report added that Thamilmichelvan stated that the "grave incident will have far reaching implications for the peace process." The LTTE accuses the Sri Lanka Navy of being involved in several deliberate and provocative attacks against the LTTE in violation of the ceasefire agreement.

SLMM and others express concern  
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4. (C) When questioned, the Norwegian led Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) spokesman Teitur Torkelson commented that the SLMM was still investigating the incident and does not expect to make a public statement until March 13. A concern that the SLMM has is that initial navy reports place the incident approximately 240 nautical miles (276 miles) off the coast and in international waters, while the navy's final written report places the incident at approximately 180 nautical miles off the coast. The shortened distance puts the incident within the area that Sri Lanka claims as its exclusive economic zone. Torkelson added that even if the incident took place in international waters the navy had certain rights in regards to "hot pursuit" or "defense" type issues that had to be reviewed. One of the SLMM tasks is to try to determine the precise location of the incident.

5. (C) Tomas Stangeland, political officer at the Norwegian Embassy, expressed concern about the repercussions the incident may have on the next round of talks. He stated that although the Norwegians have not heard anything from the LTTE as of yet, he expects the LTTE will contact them with comments after the SLMM releases its report. Stangeland believes that the incident will lead to some recriminations by the LTTE against the GSL, but that the sixth round of talks will proceed.

6. (C) Other observers seem to be of the consensus that, although the incident increases tensions, both sides are still committed to the peace process. For example Joseph Pararajasingham, a senior Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) MP, commented to the DCM that sinking of the ship does increase tensions, but the LTTE is concerned with its image in the international community and wants to be seen as being fully committed to the

peace process. Therefore, the LTTE will continue with the talks until forced to defend itself. Another TULF MP V. Anandasangaree told Poloff that incidents such as these decrease the confidence that both sides have in one another. He concluded, however, that despite the increased mistrust both sides are benefiting from the ceasefire and are thus committed to the peace talks. Jehan Perera, of the National Peace Council, a well-respected local NGO, also believes that the talks will continue. He is concerned, though, that if the series of recent incidents continue they will eventually take their toll on the negotiations.

Comment

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17. (C) The sinking of the LTTE ship by the GSL has clearly raised tensions between the two sides. Adding to the tensions are some unconfirmed reports that the President ordered the navy to sink the LTTE ship -- the navy is denying the report. How the negotiators will deal with these tensions in the next round of talks remains to be seen. The only positive outcome is the general consensus that the talks will continue. On a separate note, one unusual aspect of the most recent incident is the relatively muted response in the Tamil community. After other recent incidents the LTTE responded immediately and vociferously with protests, hartals (boycotts), and multiple complaints to and about the government. This time Thamilselvan's letter appears to be the principal response, for now. End Comment.

18. (U) Minimize considered.

WILLS